

## CHAPTER 9

# Conflicts in Leading and Managing Change: Towards a Reflexive Practice

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## Takeaways for Leading Change

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This chapter contributes to the understanding of what is required of today's leaders and managers who find themselves involved in complex change processes within organisations – where cooperation and conflicts are both present at the same time. Combining insights from complexity sciences, psychology and organisational studies, it suggests leadership should be viewed as a situated, social, relational and dialogic practice in which people and their experiences are foregrounded. Leading change becomes a reflexive practice in which the tensions and conflicts different people bring to their interactions with others are explored and appreciated. Conflicts are seen as simultaneously arousing uncertainty and intense emotional responses while fostering the movement of thinking through reflexivity. Being reflexive, then, means more than linearly addressing and resolving problems. It makes use of and reveals the tensions, conflicts and multiple perspectives of people engaged in organisational life. Through movement of thinking, the chapter offers alternate ways for understanding and acting and contributes to individual development.

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Traditional forms of management and leadership, designed to work in stable and predictable conditions, are no longer functioning in the organisations of the twenty-first century. The complex challenges faced by today's societies and organisations place increasing demands on management and leadership. In this chapter, I address the issues of how those in organisations could better cope with boundary-spanning, dynamic and open challenges, and what kind of expertise and practices they would need.

Today's leaders must take complexity and uncertainty, arising from different people engaging in everyday interactions in organisational life, more seriously into consideration. Instead of coming up with new, abstract slogans about leadership and change, leadership should focus on micro-processes and complexities within organisations arising from the differences between people. Differences such as conflicts of values, beliefs, attitudes and practices in organisational settings are an inescapable part of social relations. It is important to explore how to better cope with, and even make use of, these differences in organisations.

The chapter argues that being reflexive towards conflicts in organisational life can promote the development of individuals; and through individual development, promote organisational change. It views change as embedded in everyday practices and interaction in organisations. In exploration of the question of how people could better cope with, and even make use of, the conflicts in organisations, a multidisciplinary approach is

proposed. The approach highlights the capacity and necessity to think across traditional boundaries. Theoretically, the approach draws strands of organisational studies; psychology, more specifically existential phenomenology (see for example Rauhala, 1983; 1992; 1998); and complexity sciences, more particularly the theorisation of complex responsive processes of relating (see for example Mowles, 2011; Stacey, 2011; 2012). The combination of these theoretical strands emphasises the importance of

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concentrating on the micro-processes of organisation and examining the role of individual experiences and social interaction not only in everyday organisational life but also as the foundation for leading change. A framework of *reflexive practice* is introduced.

The chapter begins with a conceptual and theoretical exploration of conflicts in leading and managing change. When applicable, the text uses examples from the author's own research concerning public service development initiatives (Rossi, Rannisto, & Stenvall, 2016; Rossi, 2016a; 2016b). These initiatives take place in complex contexts and seek to address wicked problems (Weber & Khademian, 2008) which are boundary spanning, dynamic and open challenges, where stakeholders seek to improve services from different, often conflicting perspectives.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it explores conflicts as arising from human interaction because of the diversity of people. Second, it challenges the idea that organisational change occurs through cooperation and putting differences aside. Instead, it explores the inevitability of cooperation and conflicts. Third, it argues the experiences of individuals concerning conflict and change should be addressed in a framework of reflexive practice. The framework offers a way of thinking about the need to explore, understand, and reframe the understanding about conflict experiences, thus giving rise to individual development. Fourth, a sensemaking process about experienced conflicts through storytelling, where people are revealing and exploring their differences, is proposed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the reflexive practice framework for organisational conflicts on leading and managing change.

## Conflicts: The Good, Bad and the Inevitable

*Conflict* is here conceptualised as the contradictory ways of forming understanding in social interaction unfolding in complex organisational settings. Drawing from the psychological perspective, conflicts are seen as an individual or a group's subjective experience and understanding of a given situation, wherein the values, beliefs, attitudes and practices are noticeably different from those of others. The complexity perspective

highlights the importance of interacting with people who form different meanings and have different experiences. From this standpoint, conflicts are considered an essential part of human interaction and social life.

Conflicts arise from human interaction. Along with complexity, they are a consequence of the fundamental diversity of human life: People have different, even contradictory, values, beliefs, attitudes and practices (Mowles, 2015; Stacey, 2011). Yet conflicts are considered problems needing to be reduced, eliminated, or controlled with tools of management. Conflicts at workplaces are to be managed or even avoided (Pehrman, 2011). Putnam (1997, p. 147) has taken this everyday organisational viewpoint further by stating that “organisational conflict is often treated as a dreaded disease or . . . deviant activity.” However, Deborah Kolb and Linda Putnam (1992) suggest that instead of being dramatic confrontations or formally negotiated public events, most conflicts are embedded in the interaction of actors doing their everyday work. They occur informally and frequently out of sight. This also applies to the management of conflicts (Kolb & Putnam, 1992).

Conflicts are embedded in organisational life and are processes in which individuals and organisations have the potentiality to develop (Stacey 2011; Wall and Callister, 1995.) This stands in contrast to the idea of a conflict as something destructive. Instead controlling embedded conflicts and tensions in complex, chaotic, everyday interactions, Stacey (1992) suggests that leading change is a way of thinking that makes use of conflicts. Conflicts are, as Pondy (1989, p. 96) argues “not only functional for the organization, [they are] essential to its very existence.” However, simply noticing the conflict is not enough. In order for something novel to emerge, there needs to be an ongoing negotiation about these differences (Mowles, 2015). When revealed and reflected upon, conflicts between multiple perspectives offer alternative ways of understanding and acting, and thus drive change.

The potential for conflicts to be productive and generate positive outcomes is not a new idea (see, for example, Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1969; Pondy, 1967). Hargrave and Van de Ven (2017) also discuss conflict as productive phenomena by suggesting that taking into consideration the emotional energy conflicts release can awaken the experiencer from his

or her cognitive and behavioural apathy. The emotional energy translates into transformation. In everyday organisational life, conflicts often arouse intense emotional responses of uncertainty, anxiety, frustration, irresolution or even anger and fear. The intensity of emotional responses to conflicts is why it is so common to try to suppress differences and avoid conflicts. Can one address these emotions as awakenings, as Hargrave and Van de Ven (2017) suggest?

## Conflicts and Cooperation

Cooperation is often seen as a key to untangling the complex challenges of today's world, in which multiple actors and stakeholders are required to work together (Durose, Mangan, Needham, Rees, & Hilton, 2013; Parrado, Van Ryzin, Bocaïrd, & Löffler, 2013). This is especially important when thinking about solutions to complex issues such as poverty or environmental problems. Towards this end, the chapter examines development initiatives in the public services. These aim to meet the needs of citizens in effective and efficient ways.

Development initiatives provide illustrations of cross-sectoral, complex and dynamic processes, environments and problems with multiple (groups of) actors and administrative levels. Administrative arrangements in local and regional levels of government are going through major changes. In Finland, policymakers have identified a growing need to find the most effective and efficient procedures and practices in the health and social services sectors. The responsibilities for organising these services are being relocated from municipalities to counties in January 2019. Service producers from the public and private sectors, non-profit organisations, front-line workers, public administrators, politicians, customers and citizens are all involved in this process and come from various, often-conflicting perspectives. Presumably, they all share a common goal: to have services that meet the needs of citizens in an effective and efficient way. However, the practices, assumptions, values, and beliefs of these different stakeholder groups vary. For this reason, there is a wide range of perspectives on how this change should be implemented.

The mainstream view in organisational studies suggests that change in organisations occurs when people working together put their differences aside (Mowles, 2011). Public service actors face constant demands to work together in order to cope with wicked problems (Weber & Khademian, 2008) and reform pressures (Durose et al., 2013; Parrado et al., 2013). However, the presence of both cooperation and conflict in organisational life is inevitable. Complex challenges can be overcome through an understanding of boundary-spanning cooperation. In addition, understanding of the limits, obstacles and drivers to change in this new organisational paradigm is also essential.

The conceptual and theoretical argument developed here draws from research on the *Monipalvelupiste* (Multiple Service Point) which operated in Jyväskylä, Finland, between the years 2013 and 2016 (Rossi et al., 2016). The project is another example of a public service development initiative aimed at improving the quality and cost efficiency of services. Due to the economic struggles faced in the public sector in Jyväskylä, there was a growing need to find new ways, both within the city's own organisation and in collaboration with the nongovernmental sector, to organise social and health service delivery. This was officially pursued through cooperation between different service sectors. While the organisers of the project emphasised cooperation they nevertheless did not make use of the diversity of the actors nor did they pay attention to the conflicts in their efforts to improve public services.

In contrast to the idea that change occurs by people collaborating and setting their differences aside (Mowles, 2015), the strands from complexity science understand change differently. From this perspective, change occurs not by concentrating on cooperation and setting differences aside but by negotiating differences in interactions with others (Mowles, 2015; Stacey, 2011). Instead of focusing exclusively on cooperation in the organisational context, complexity perspective sees value in both cooperation and conflict. As Cooley (1918, p. 39) argued one hundred years ago, "...conflicts and cooperation are not separable things, but phases of one process which always involves something of both." This is especially relevant because stakeholders positioned at different points in organisational structures invariably have different interests.

## Conflicts and Change: A Reflexive Practice

This chapter makes use of a set of theoretical strands from organisational studies, psychology and complexity sciences. Through these strands, conflicts and change in complex organisational settings, are understood using the framework of *reflexive practice*. Reflexive practice refers to the need to explore, understand, and reframe understanding of conflict experiences, so that they would give rise to individual development. The framework consists of the following underlying assumptions (see Figure 1): subjective experience, relational life context, sensemaking, and storytelling. Reflexive leadership practices emphasise the experiences of individual actors and pays attention to everyday interaction in an organisational context.

- 1 **UNCERTAINTY ARISES**  
when people with conflicting values, beliefs, attitudes and practices in complex organisational settings are cooperating while trying to get things done, conflict is inevitable.
- 2 **SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE**  
Conflicts in organisational settings are happening in multiple levels but always experienced by an individual. This calls for emphasis on micro-level analysis – people and their subjective experiences.
- 3 **RELATIONAL LIFE CONTEXT**  
Who we are as humans, and how an individual experiences the world, is central, but it always relates to the life context of the one experiencing.
- 4 **SENSE-MAKING THROUGH STORYTELLING**  
Making sense of their experiences, people tell stories. In these sense-making processes, the transformation of meanings and action has the potentiality to emerge.

FIGURE 1. The underlying assumptions of reflexive practice

First, conflicts of differing values, beliefs, attitudes and practices of people in interaction are inevitable and thus *arouse uncertainty* whilst people are competing and cooperating in trying to get things done (Stacey, 2011). Second, conflicts occur on different levels: between the values of individuals and organisational demands, between individuals working in the same organisation (perhaps a leader and an employee), or between the practices and values of organisations required to collaborate. Two practical examples of different conflict levels emerge from research concerning Finnish public service development initiatives. First, conflict took place between the service practices of a non-profit organisation and the public service system (see Rossi, 2016a). Second, another level of conflict was between groups of actors – citizens, service producers, and public servants – with different values and beliefs (Rossi, 2016b; Rossi et al., 2016). Regardless of the level of conflict, conflict is *always experienced subjectively at the individual level*.

Third, the *relational life context* offers ingredients for the individual to experience. Who we are and what we experience are in relation to social life and the life context. Our impressions about the self and the world are constantly forming and changing as we interact with others (Rauhala, 1983; 1992; 1998; Stacey, 2011). This suggestion relies particularly on Norbert Elias's (1978, 1991, 1939/2000) argument that the individual and the social are two sides of the same coin. People form the social, and the social forms people. The individual life context also consists of concrete conditions – place, culture, language, history, community, society and human relations – to which an individual is in relation with (Backman, 2016, 74; Rauhala, 1983; 1992). The psychological perspective, then, draws the attention to one's life context, emphasising individuality, subjectivity and the experiences of individuals (Rauhala 1983; 1992; 1998). Where Mead argues: “we become a self intersubjectively” (as cited in Mowles, 2015, p. 22), Rauhala (1983; 1992; 1998) refers to this as existence in relation to reality.

Fourth, the profound aspect of one's life context is in relationality and *processes of sensemaking*. People are in relation to and create meaningful relationships with all factors present in their personal life context. It is in the individual sensemaking processes where experiences concerning life context and its aspects become meaningful. The sensemaking process



is a continuous, dialogical and reflexive transformation; it changes the person's meaning relationship with the individual life context, thus shaping the actions and/or the meanings given to actions (Rauhala, 1992). When individual sensemaking processes manifest in relations with other people, conflicts arise and transform. Making sense about conflicts experienced in everyday organisational life is a back-and-forth dialectic where exploring one point of view calls out an alternative, possibly conflicting point of view that can potentially modify the former. This dialectic demonstrates the movement of thinking that generates more than one perspective about the situation at hand (Mowles, 2015.)

To summarise, the development of new individual meanings and perspectives occurring in sensemaking processes of reflexive practice can potentially foster the development of individuals and organisations. The framework of reflexive practice suggests the need to explore the differences in individual life contexts, which we bring to our relations with each other while trying to get things done in daily organisational practices. This reflexivity of contradictions is a highly individual and subjective act of exploring and recognising the tensions in our own thinking. Yet, it is also happening in social and relational environments. It generates more than one perspective through the movement of thinking, fostering the possibility of transformation.

## Conflicts: Sensemaking in Research

The sensemaking process of exploring differences in thinking and in one's life context can occur through storytelling. Storytelling is a way to practice the reflexive practice – to stop, think and make sense upon the conflicts and complexity. As Tsoukas (2011) argues, new knowledge can emerge when unreflective practices are turned into reflective ones in reflexive social interactions. Storytelling and narratives are windows to the meanings actors ascribe to conflicts and their experiences. One's impressions about the self and the world can be seen as a contextual, constantly forming narrative. The "truth" about conflicts is constructed continuously in people's minds. This sensemaking also takes place

relationally, in relation to the experiencer's situationality (Backman, 2016; Brown & Heggs 2005; Stacey, 2011). In storytelling, the constructing of reality is happening in relation to others. The research process offers a window for the construction of reality to manifest in a relationship between researcher and informant.

Researching experiences entails emphasising the meanings and interpretations actors assign to conflicts they experience and how they articulate these meanings. Conflict is not important in and of themselves. What becomes important are the changing meanings actors give to these experiences while making sense of and telling stories about them (Kolb & Putnam, 1992). Mather and Yngvesson's (1980) understanding of conflict is that it is not something that "happens" – and can thus be studied conclusively – but rather a process, transforming over time because of the contradictory interests and meanings given by actors. This invites researchers to look beyond the rational, public scene of conflict (Kolb & Putnam 1992) and to uncover the hidden, informal and private meanings, aspects, emotions and transformation embedded in conflict processes. In order to understand conflicts in complex organisational settings, one – be they a practitioner, leader, manager or researcher – must look beyond the events actors are facing. Kolb and Putnam (1992) suggest that when studying conflicts, the unit of analysis should be a dispute(s).

Development initiatives in Finnish public social and health services provides illustrations of cross-sectoral, complex and dynamic processes, context and problems with multiple stakeholders and levels of administration. All actors share a common goal – to have services that meet the needs of citizens in an effective and efficient manner. However, interpretations about what was effective and efficient, and from whose perspective, varied considerably. By studying the experiences of actors and recognising the differences they identify and experience while cooperating with others, researchers can gain an increased understanding as to how conflicts shape and affect organisational outcomes. Research on conflict can also help to explore differences in order to aim for positive outcomes.

The task of a researcher is first to help informants understand, and potentially re-conceptualise, their interpretations of conflict experiences. Second, it is to help them transform the sensemaking process. Putnam

(2010) refers to these processes as framing and reframing; her assumption is that negotiators are people who have the possibility to foster these processes. Taking the negotiator's role, a researcher can enact framing and reframing, most commonly in the interview processes where informants can reflect on their experiences and form their own understanding of the overall context. Understanding can be shaped by exploring alternative explanations and reframing one's relation to their life context whilst telling stories. In research, this can be understood as a co-constructive sensemaking process between researcher and the informant. In everyday organisational life, the sensemaking process can occur between a consultant and employees and/or leaders and managers; between leaders, managers and employees; between employees; or between different stakeholders, to name a few.

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Understanding can be shaped by exploring alternative explanations and reframing one's relation to their life context whilst telling stories.

## Discussion

Why, then, is it so difficult to address conflicts as drivers of transformation? Arguably, the subjectivity of conflict, always experienced by individuals, affects the process of reflexive practice. After all, conflict is a contrast to individual identity. The need for change, then, calls for changed identity. This affects the intensity of the emotional responses of uncertainty, frustration, or even anger, to name a few, to which the conflicting practices, attitudes, values and beliefs give rise.

Leaders attempt to overcome these often disturbing and negative emotions aroused by conflicts by implementing traditional ways of management and leadership. Yet these do not work very well in settings of uncertainty and complexity. It is easy – but not quite complex enough – to place one's trust and hopes in cooperation when dealing with wicked problems and everyday tasks in complex organisational life.

However, in order to be successful amidst these complexities, leaders cannot rely on attempts to pursue only balance and consensus, which can lead to repeating old ways of doing or copying others (Stacey, 2011). I have argued instead that the role of conflicts, and how they are linked to leadership and change, becomes crucial:

Let me suggest that an organization is precisely the opposite of the cooperative system. Think of an organization as a means for internalizing conflicts, for bringing them within a bounded structure so that they can be confronted and acted out. . . . Far from being a “breakdown” in the system, conflict in this alternative model is the very essence of what an organization is. If conflict isn’t happening, then the organization has no reason for being (Pondy, 1992, p. 259).

In the social relations of organisational life, cooperation and conflict are both present at the same time. This is because people bring their differences to their interactions with others. Through dialogue and negotiation of these differences, learning and change can emerge. It is not only at negotiation tables but especially in everyday discussions that people have the potential to change and build their future – and the future of their organisations (Stacey, 2011). In leading change, then, it becomes essential to pay attention to everyday interaction, and most importantly, to concentrate on the negotiation of differences as well as on reaching out for conflicts in a manner that encourages them to be negotiated rather than avoided.

The argument, developed on the basis of empirical research on boundary-spanning public service development initiatives, is that being reflexive towards the conflicts of organisational life could promote the development of individuals, and change in organisations through individual development. Dealing with and aiming to lead change is about foregrounding people and their experiences and paying attention to what is happening, in particular within intra and inter-organisational social relations. However, because uncertainty and intense emotional responses arise from conflicts, it is understandable that people are not keen on addressing their differences. The practice of leadership and management then becomes about enabling cooperation and emphasising, not

suppressing, diversity. This stands in contrast to the idea of leadership as choosing one “best possible” intention over another in a top-down manner.

In addition to their need to become reflexive practitioners, leaders and managers are in a position in which they have a responsibility to enable their employees to develop their abilities to think and express themselves reflexively. This might involve, for example, enabling dialogue and negotiation, offering sufficient time and opportunities to pay attention to and be reflexive about how and why their work is carried out in practice. It is the responsibility of leaders to deal with conflicts involving values and power and to help others do so in a reflexive manner (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). Conflicts are inherently moral and ethical activities (Ehrich & English, 2013). This suggests that reflexive practices offer a possibility for organisational transformation through more critical, responsible and ethical actions.

Change, and thus leading change, requires criticising habitual practices as well as questioning one’s own thinking, experiences and the ways one is relating with others (Chia, 1996; Heidegger, 1966). This reflexive practice opens up the possibility of changing current practices, giving rise to alternative ways of thinking and doing. However, actors are embedded in their historically constructed institutions and life contexts. It is not easy to let go old ways of being in relation with the world. Because changing one’s way of thinking is a profoundly subjective, individual act of self-reflexivity (Cunliffe & Jun, 2015), it can be a difficult process. It is, however, the most important process in the development of individuals and organisations.

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